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The social museum in the Caribbean : grassroots heritage initiatives and community engagement

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Conclusions

No museum is an island.

Stephen E. Weil (1983: 103)

Initially presented as a keynote address in 1980, Weil stressed this viewpoint that museums exist in a network of interdependence as opposed to isolation. Concerned with the support museums could give each other, as well as the bad influence they might have on each other in worse cases, his argument was that museums have to connect in order to survive and thrive. Considering the profoundly societal roles of museums today, this statement has taken on an added dimension and perhaps become even more true. Museums are not only dependent on other museums, but exist solely within a community of people, an integral part of the complex organism that is society. In the Caribbean, this system of museums existing within participatory relationships is pronounced. However, one might argue that Weil's original metaphor was flawed by equating islands with isolation: in the Caribbean, since pre-colonial times, sea-scapes have closely linked the islands and mainland together. Indeed, speaking from a Caribbean perspective, Édouard Glissant put forth a similar notion of the museum as consisting of a network of interrelationships, of a collection of worlds. However, he proposed this idea through a different island-related metaphor:

I imagine the museum as an archipelago.

Édouard Glissant (Glissant & Obrist 2012: 5)

For this particular research into community engagement, it was useful to combine aspects of these two metaphors in order to consider Caribbean museums as a mosaic. At the start of this research project, I had never been to the Caribbean and only had a vague, stereotypical image in my mind's eye of what a Caribbean museum might look like. Now, after four years of research and many museum visits, the picture has become both clearer and more complex. There is no single quintessential Caribbean museum, just as there is no quintessential Caribbean country or island. The Caribbean as a region can be viewed as a patchwork in which a diversity of islands and countries are interwoven to form a complex whole. In the same way, Caribbean museums can be seen as a multi-faceted mosaic. Each museum has its own unique characteristics and qualities. Yet, at the same time, any given museum is also like a number of other museums in some way – the collection's history might be similar to *A*, its location

similar to *B*, its visitors to *C*, and so on. Just as some tiles in a mosaic might be similar in color, size, or shape. Attempting another metaphor, perhaps we could speak of a Caribbean museological set of ingredients, from which each museum has made its own unique dish. In the course of this research and fieldwork, the image of the 'Social Museum in the Caribbean' has been slowly simmering.

The Social Museum in the Caribbean

Having determined that there is no quintessential Caribbean museum, it is time to reveal this mosaic image of the social museum in the Caribbean. Caribbean museums are able to take on a myriad of societal roles and reach out to different levels of society and diverse audiences. They are able to do so because the Caribbean museum landscape consists of a wide range of museums types, which have different ownership structures, unique museum settings, and improvise in adopting a range of participatory practices in order to connect to a multiplicity of related communities. Thus, the diversity of contemporary Caribbean society is actively reflected in the region's museumscape. Indeed, Caribbean museums are embedding themselves purposefully as subjective actors in their societies through community engagement processes. Particularly grassroots museums take on strong societal roles by reaching out to communities and engaging with histories, heritages, and themes that otherwise may be (or are) excluded. Some of these grassroots museums, ephemeral museums, have singular roles to play in the present and cannot be sustained in the same form for the future. Without glossing over the difficulties that Caribbean museums face – *e.g.* financial insecurity, limited regional training opportunities for staff, natural disasters, colonial pressures, political conflict – they are resilient institutions. They work dynamically and flexibly, driven by passion and creativity, and are significantly valuable participants in Caribbean society. The mosaic of the Caribbean museumscape has three defining characteristics: diverse, grassroots, and dynamic.

Experiencing the social museum in the Caribbean has led to a confrontation of the definition of what a museum is or can be. It has broadened my understanding of the meaning of the term in order to encompass a wide collection of phenomena, each aimed at disclosing and sharing some kind of heritage with the public. This research has also reinforced my conviction that museums are not a product of the elite, nor are they a resource reserved for the select few. When one is willing to recognize the different forms the museum can take, it becomes apparent that people everywhere in the world – no matter their circumstances – need museums, create museums, and visit museums.

Recommendations

In the wake of this study, which provides a first regional insight into the community engagement practices and processes of Caribbean museums, the opportunities for further research, collaboration, and engagement have only increased. For those working in or with Caribbean museums, it is hoped that this dissertation can be a source of inspiration. While many contemporary Caribbean museums apply community engagement practices, examples from other museums in the region can provide support to keep

reaching out to communities. Caribbean museums, despite their differences, are often faced with similar problems or settings. Thus, it is immensely valuable for Caribbean museologists to continue building a regional contact network, exchanging expertise and sharing their collective capabilities. Regional organizations, such as the Museums Association of the Caribbean, are key to providing a place for these exchanges. Through consolidation efforts, museums in the Caribbean can work together to strengthen their societal roles even further.

For those wishing to research museums or collections in the Caribbean, this research may provide a starting point or present opportunities for case studies. Many of the museums researched in the course of this project have never been studied in greater detail and there are also ample opportunities for regional or thematic museological studies. For instance, the hypothesis that museums' participatory styles are related to their linguistic area and thus are the result of colonial legacies. As another example, ephemeral museums would be a valuable focus for further research. In addition, the impact of community engagement practices and processes would benefit from assessment.

Finally, for those working in or with museums anywhere in the world, museological research warrants expansion by shifting the focus from national museums or major institutions to grassroots museums and ephemeral museums. More effort could be made to engage in museological research in all geographical regions of the world and to understand the value of museums based on the needs of their particular, related communities. All of this research would require a broadening of the understanding of the term museum and of the field of museology. Caribbean museums can inspire institutions around the world thanks to their creativity, flexibility, resiliency, wide engagement, deep dedication, passion, and patience. No museum is an island; the global museumscape is an archipelago of interconnected institutions, embedded into their communities, benefitting greatly from an exchange of expertise.

